One thing or the other?: Caring for children and paid labour

van Dongen, M.C.P.

Publication date:
1994

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

WORC 92
Work and Organization Research Centre

[redacted]

R3
t. male workers
t. children
v. child care
v. fatherhood

PAPER

One thing or the other?
Caring for children and paid labour:
Men's aspirations and the extent of their realisations

Mirjam van Dongen

WORC PAPER 94.05.024/6

Paper prepared for the Conference on Changing Fatherhood,
WORC, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

May 24 - 26, 1994

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was written for the conference on Changing Fatherhood, WORC, Tilburg University, The Netherlands, May 24, 1994.

One thing or the other?
Caring for children and paid labour:
Men's aspirations and the extent of their realisations

Mirjam van Dongen

WORC, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Keywords: aspirations, care, fatherhood

Men's aspirations with regard to paid labour, having children and participation in childcare and household tasks and the manner and degree to which they put these aspirations into practice, are increasingly becoming the focus of (scientific) attention. Although there has been a noticeable shift in public opinion towards the idea that men should be more involved in childcare, actual evidence of any real change in the amount of practical work men actually do as fathers remains elusive. Changes which have occurred in paternal behaviour have remained slight, despite the opinions men voice. Although fathers may be prepared to participate to a greater extent in certain childcare activities, particularly where mothers are employed, this usually involves the more pleasurable aspects of childcare, such as playing with children or taking them out, with routine care being left to women. The increased diversity of contemporary family life presents a dilemma in our assessment of change and continuity in men's relationship to childcare and household tasks. For there is evidence of change, even though the lives of many men and women seem to continue much as before. Most of the evidence we have seems to indicate that men do take parenting very seriously, and yet in the vast majority of cases men's participation falls far short of genuine sharing of responsibilities.

The gap between men's (reportedly) thoughts and deeds in terms of their apparently increasing commitment to adopting a more participatory, egalitarian role in childcare, is difficult to overcome. Current theoretical perpectives based on both the role and exchange theory fail sufficiently to explain the inconsistency of fathers' thoughts and deeds. My prime focus here is the question of whether or not men want to have an equal share in childcare. I will use the concept of care as my guideline for examining men's aspirations and the extent to which they are realised.

I will start by giving a brief summary of the three most common hypotheses, followed by an introduction of the concept of care and its implications. Finally, I will test men's aspirations and the extent of their realisations against the concept of care, to examine the extent to which this is a successful way of explaining the gap between paternal thoughts and deeds.

Current Hypotheses

The three most common hypotheses, derived from role theory and exchange theory, on how and why housework and childcare are divided are: (a) *relative resources* including the power relationship between partners (b) *ideology* or gender role attitudes, and (c) *time availability* or demand/response capability (Coverman 1985, Spitze 1986, Ross 1987, Kamo 1988, Coltrane & Ishii-Kuntz 1992, Duindam 1991, Van der Lippe 1993).

Explanations based on men's and women's *relative resources* derive from the notion of 'fair' exchange. The division of household labour and childcare depends on a rational and maximally efficient allocation of household members' time to paid labour, domestic labour and leisure. The assumption is that couples try to maximise their earning potentials by allocating tasks in rational manner. The pattern of domestic task sharing is typically determined by an implicit negotiation between spouses which is based on their power relationship. The underlying assumption is that the spouse with greatest power and authority can minimise his or her participation in undesirable activities, including (many) household and childcare tasks. The hypothesis therefore, is that the more resources (e.g. high educational level, high occupational position and high wage earning ability) men have compared to women, the less time they will spend on domestic labour.

Three remarks should be made. Firstly, this perspective appears not to take account of the fact that socially valued resources, such as education, knowledge, income, status and occupational position, are unequally divided between men and women. This inequality is carried over into marriage, with the result that this inequality of power becomes an inherent part of the relationship. Secondly, this perspective presupposes that the spouse with more power (which in many cases this will be the male partner) is able to delegate household and childcare tasks as undesirable activities to his or her partner. This means that household and childcare tasks are valued less than paid labour and are implicitly viewed as onerous and menial. Care in our

society is indeed valued less than paid labour, but personal preferences can roun counter to this: paid labour can also be experienced as an undesirable activity and care as a desirable one. Thirdly, this perspective does not take account of the fact that women have emotional power because they are in charge of childcare and household tasks. Women often set the rules, while men have to gain their position in the 'caring arena'.

The *ideology or gender role attitudes* perspective is based on the argument that the division of labour reflects ideological views on gender equality and more specifically, that partners who endorse the principle of gender equality are expected to share domestic labour fairly. Therefore, the more traditional both spouses are, the less the husband's relative share is. Education is often seen as an indicator for gender role attitudes: modern gender role attitudes are supposedly associated with high levels of education and traditional gender role attitudes with low levels of education.

I would make two fundamental comments on this. First of all, gender roles nowadays are rarely ever so specific that people know exactly how to behave in every situation. Given the fading boundaries between masculinity and feminity and the lack of role models for 'caring fathers', there is scope for people to act on the basis of own beliefs. Secondly, a change in paternal participation in caretaking does not necessarily result in changed values or gender role attitudes and vice versa. Internal and external impediments may give rise to a less clear relationship between paternal behaviour and gender role attitudes. Factors such as internalised values, education, age, income, situation at work, social networks and household composition are all capable of influencing the degree to which men put their attitudes into practice.

The *time availability* or demand/response capability hypothesis emphasises the relative amounts of time available for performing domestic labour. The mere fact that most men work full time outside the home decreases the time available to them for domestic labour, but the fact that an increasing number of women work outside the home decreases the amount of time available to them as well. The theory is that (a high) female occupational status will positively influence male participation in childcare. Time availability can only provide a meaningful explanation of men's domestic participation if the demands placed on men to perform household and childcare tasks are taken into consideration. The hours men devote to domestic tasks are therefore a function of the demands placed on husbands to fulfil domestic responsibilities and their ability to respond to these demands.

This perspective suggests that work and care are complementary, but fatherhood can have a diversity of meanings for men and they may enact being a father in different ways, regardless of whether their female partners have a paid job. Men who work long hours may, for example, involve themselves heavily in the educational aspects of child-rearing such as reading stories, watching children's programmes on television, talking to the baby, and playing. These caretaking tasks do not interfere with daily routines. The question of whether a low level of participation in caretaking signifies a low level of interest, commitment or motivation should be examined.

All three hypotheses fail to provide an adequate means of gaining an insight into men's aspirations with regard to combining paid labour and childcare. Not simply because their findings are often contradictary, but also because the position of women, rather than the position of men, is frequently taken as a startingpoint. Research to gain an insight into men's aspirations and the extent of their realisations should focus on men's experiences of paid labour and childcare and the ways in which men enact fatherhood. Good fatherhood is no longer limited to having a good livelihood. Given the lack of role models, men have to find their own way; this can lead to a multitude of fatherhood practices. The Dutch sociologists Knijn, van Nunen & van der Avort (1994), for example, distinguish five different types, namely: *workers* who work long hours and scarcely participate in childcare tasks; *hyperactives* who work full time and make a major contribution to childcare tasks (one might call them the male equivalents of the 'Supermom' I guess); *combi's* who, whilst combining paid labour with childcare, seek to find a lower-level balance of this compared to hyperactives; *carers* who are either unemployed or work part-time, but who make a major contribution to childcare tasks; and finally *minimals* who neither work nor care to any great extent. As these different father types make clear, the unbroken image of the father-provider must be called into question. Moreover, it is debatable whether work and care are indeed complementary.

During the past decades fathers have come increasingly to be seen as being equally competent as women to raise young children, and seem to have positioned themselves as competitors in terms of having the skills required for raising and caring for children. Although not all men are willing to give up their professional careers, men do want to play a part in caring for their children. Despite this, very few researchers have used the caring aspect as a guideline in their research.

The Concept of Caring

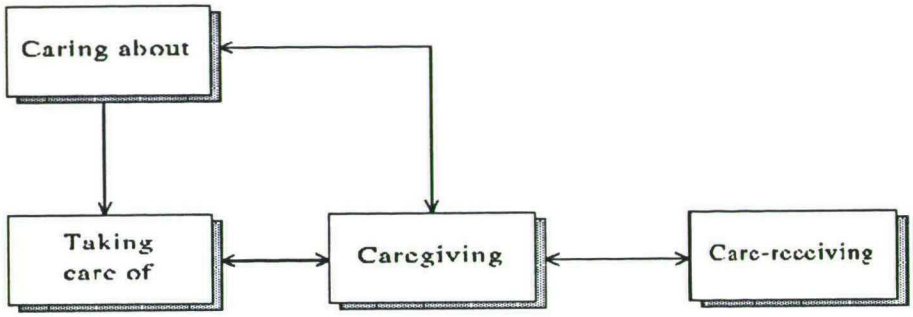
Feminist researchers have developed some interesting thoughts on care (Graham 1983, Ungerson 1983 & 1987, Waerness 1987 & 1990, Fisher & Tronto 1990, Tronto 1993), but they are rarely applied to the issue of paternal involvement. Based on the concept of care the way in which paternal participation in childcare is measured, can be criticised on two counts (cf. McKee 1987), namely: its narrow definition on both participation and childcare. Participation in childcare is often seen as direct participation. The underlying assumption is that involvement in childcare is equivalent to or can be conferred from direct participation. The degree to which fathers care is based on the regularity and frequency with which different caretaking tasks are performed. The choice of tasks seems arbitrary and is rarely justified and this range of caretaking tasks cannot adequately measure fathers' involvement in childcare[1]. Involvement should be divided into performance and responsibilities. In order to measure care, therefore, the concept should be broken down into its different parts. Direct caretaking activities, such as feeding, bathing and nappy-changing, should be examined in conjunction with psychological aspects such as notions of responsibility and accountability. Measurement of fathers' participation in childcare should include not only the performance of caretaking tasks, but also how those tasks are contemplated, arranged, and organised.

At the most general level, care denotes engagement of some kind. In broad terms, caring is a concept which encompasses that range of human experiences associated with feeling concern for, and taking charge of, the well-being of others. Care implies a reaching out to someone other than oneself and carriers the implicit suggestion that this will lead to some kind of action. The child's needs are seen as providing startingpoint of what must be done. As Fisher and Tronto pointed out, care consists of four analytically separate, but interrelated, aspects (Graham 1983, Ungerson 1983 & 1987, Fisher & Tronto 1990, Tronto 1993), namely: caring about, taking care of, caregiving and care-receiving. These different aspects of caring may be carried out by one person or may be divided amongst different people (e.g. both parents). The three aspects - caring about, taking care of and caregiving - can be illustrated as follows: *Sheet 1 (The aspects of care)* (See diagram on next page).

---

[1] A related problem is that the meaning of tasks may differ from one households to another. In some households the contact between father and child is experienced as being important, whilst in other households, the income earned is given greater importance.

Aspects of Care



I will now describe each of these aspects of caring.

Caring about. Caring about is based on spontaneous feelings of kinship. In ordinary usage, the expression caring about is often used to suggest love and affection. Caring about does not necessarily entail skills (he regretted that he could do nothing to heal the children), but skills relating to perception and trained attention may influence what we care about (how could he care about something he did not even notice). Caring about, therefore, entails noticing the existence of a need for care and making an assessment that this need should be met, i.e. caring about involves a certain degree of attentiveness to the needs of children. If we are not attentive to children's needs, we cannot possibly address those needs[2]. This is because caring depends on having knowledge which is peculiar to the particuliar child being cared for. To provide such knowledge, the caring person must devote a great deal of attention to learning what the child might need. This attentiveness is not instinctive, but rather something which can be learned.

---

[2] The question is, when is ignorance of children's needs truly ignorance, and when is it inattentiveness?

Caring about does not necessarily involve the direct meeting of the need for care. Caring about, therefore, is characterised by a general form of commitment and is an orientation rather than a motivation.

Taking care of. Taking care of involves assuming some responsibility for the identified need of children and determining how to respond to it. It involves the recognition that it is possible to act to address these unmet needs. It suggests responsibility for initiating and maintaining caring activities. It presupposes the idea that it is possible to take the action required. Recognition that a child is hungry involves recognising that something can be done: preparing food, feeding, perhaps first buying some food or getting hold of some money. Therefore contemplating, decision-making, arranging and organising caring activities combined form a major part of taking care of. Sufficient knowledge and skills are necessary to be able to assess which caring activities are needed and to predict the outcome of these actions, since responsibility implies accountability. This means that in many cases participation without engagement is insufficient[3].

Caregiving. Caregiving involves the direct meeting of the needs for care. It involves concrete caretaking tasks. It entails responding to the particuliar, concrete, physical and emotional needs of children. Caregiving requires continuous and intensive time commitments. The knowledge involved in caregiving requires a detailed, everyday understanding, since it may be necessary for a person to revise their caregiving strategy to respond to cicumstances changing from one minute or day to the next. Making revisions of this kind requires experience, skill and judgement. Competence in child-rearing is dependent on both practical experience in caregiving work and on personal knowledge of the individual child in question (cf. attentiveness). Intending to provide care and even accepting responsibility for it, but then failing to provide good care, is that the need for care is unsufficiently met.

Care-receiving. The person who is being cared for responds to the care he or she receives. After feeding the hungry child will no longer be hungry. Care-receiving provides the knowledge that caring needs have actually been met.

---

[3] One fundamental fact, of course, is that responsibility for caring is still genderbiased.

The concept of care described above may have major implications for understanding fatherhood practices. The concept makes it possible to gain a broader insight into the father's role. Using the concept of care as a guideline, it is possible to identify the part men play in contemplating, decision-making and making arrangements concerning their children, to examine men's level of interest in and knowledge of their babies, and their attentiveness and sensitivity to children's cues; and to examine how men engage in the social, educational, moral and disciplinary aspects of child-rearing. Research should, of course, also focus on how men feel about their role as provider and the way men's work and domestic roles interrelate. All these areas help to broaden our insight beyond direct and physical caretaking and to provide a context in which men's participation can be understood. Insights of this kind may provide a better understanding of the inconsistency of thoughts and deeds in paternal behaviour, because the concept makes it possible to detect subtle differences between fathers, their values, ideals and overall contribution to child-caring.

Men's aspirations and the extent of their realisation: some findings

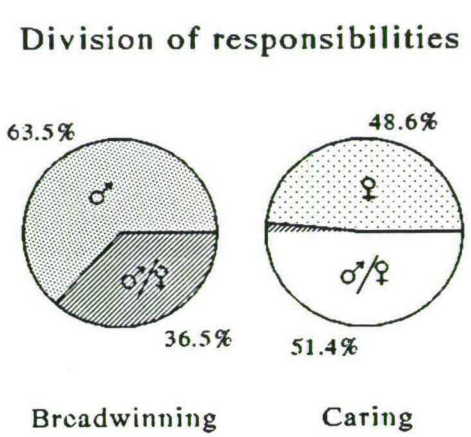
I will now test men's aspirations with regard to paid labour and childcare and the degree to which they are put into practice against the concept of care. This will be based on data collected from 215 men, who were interviewed about their aspirations with regard to paid labour and child care and the extent to which they realised these aspirations[4]. The men satisfied two criteria. All were married or cohabiting with a woman, and all had children under four years of age. Although I was only in the early stages of considering at the time the data was collected, the results would seem to confirm the implications I mentioned earlier.

Let me start by saying something about the aspect of *caring about*. In the first instance caring about was defined as feelings of love, affection and kinship. It was taken for granted in the interviews that a father would have this sorts of feelings for his (newborn) child. No questions were asked to measure the extent to which fathers cared about their children. It became clear to me later that caring about is more specific than this general feeling of love. It involves more than simply noticing that the needs for care exists and the assessment that these needs should

[4] Sociology students each selected each three fathers from amomgst their parents' friends and family, and interviewed three fathers unkown to them using a structured questionnaire.

be met: it requires a certain degree of attentiveness. So questions should have been asked about the extent to which fathers are attentive to (or ignorant of) their children's cues. A follow up study planned for this summer will take account of this.

Taking care of. To measure the aspect of taking care of children, the fathers were asked questions about their perceptions of their share in taking responsibility for breadwinning and caregiving. For much of the 20th century, working and the responsibility for breadwinning has been associated with men, whilst caring and the responsibility for caregiving has been associated with women. Nowadays the picture is less clearly defined, as my findings confirmed. *Sheet 2 (Division of responsibilities).* Although a large number of men felt that the responsibility for breadwinning was more or less shared, most fathers felt they had prime responsibility for providing financial security for their families. They appeared to be strongly committed to their work. Financal considerations and possible negative consequences for their careers were given as arguments for not working less after their (first) child was born. An interesting finding which emerged was that responsibility for caring was not necessarily seen as female or shared responsibility, regardless of whether breadwinning was seen as a male or shared responsibility. Male responsibility for breadwinning does not automatically lead to female responsibility for caring. Experiences varied.



Whereas caring implies some sort of on-going responsibility and commitment, the relationship between taking care of and caring for children is more complex than might be supposed at first glance. It is likely that the parent to whom responsibility for childcare is ascribed, will be more frequently involved in caregiving and it is equally probable that responsibility for childcare will be ascribed to the parent who is more frequently involved in caregiving, but although the men questionned were less involved in direct caregiving than their female partners, a (small) majority felt equally responsible for care (i.e. taking care of). Perhaps this is indicative of a general agreement with regard to shared parenting - that being a parent entails taking responsibility for caring for children. And of course, each man may have his own definition of sharing. But it

may also be an indication of the fact that in practice most fathers cannot see any alternative to adopting the chief breadwinning role. Indeed, the men felt that their jobs interfered with their opportunities for having contact with their children: they wished they had more time to spend with their children.

Caregiving. The extent to which fathers were involved in caregiving, was measured in two ways. First, a list of caretaking tasks which had to be performed regularly was compiled. Secondly, men were asked to assess their own share compared to that of their partners and other people (e.g. day care providers). All fathers are involved in childcare tasks to some extent. This emerged from the differences the fathers spoke of between the way they fulfiled their parenthood role and the way this was done by their own fathers. The fathers cited differences in contact with children: that they intervened more in issues concerning child-rearing and spent more time with their children, than their fathers had. Because in practice most men are the main breadwinners, it is obvious that, like their own fathers, their share in routine caretaking tasks such as feeding and nappy-changing, does not equal that of their wives. Although all men said they were involved in caregiving, women are in charge: they make preparations. As we saw earlier, men's participation in certain childcare activities usually involves the more pleasurable aspects of childcare. This is confirmed by the data. Fathers seem to particularly involve themselves in affective activities, such as cuddling and romping with children, and in educational activities, such as playing games, reading (bedtime) stories and watching children's programmes on television.

Conclusions

There exists an inconsistency between paternal thoughts and deeds, between men's aspirations and the extent in which they are realised. Fathers wish to be more involved in childcare, and yet the practice is different. The three most common hypotheses - relative resources, ideology and time availability - fail to provide an adequate means of gaining insight into men's aspirations and the extent to which they are realised. According to the *relative resources hypothesis* the spouse with greatest power will minimise his or her participation in childcare tasks. Given the higher wages of the men questionned (most wives work part-time), there is scope for men to minimise their share in childcare. And yet they wish to be móre involved in

childcare and do not view childcare as an undesirable acitivity. The *ideology hypothesis* presumes a relationship between attitudes and behaviour. But this relationship seems rather diffuse. Men who view responsibility for childcare as shared, may still be the main-breadwinner and as a result carry most responsibility for providing financial security for their families. The *time availability hypothesis* suggests that work and care are complementary. This complementary does not always exist, even though many men experience their available time as a bottle-neck.

Using the *concept of care* may help us to gain a better insight into the inconsistency between men's reported behaviour and values. By developing a concept of men's participation in childcare in this way, it may be possible to narrow the gap between thoughts and deeds and to make a better (or even 'true') evaluation of fathers' participation in childcare. By using the concept of care, we can extend the range of tasks to take account of 'indirect' and nonphysical caretaking, particularly with regard to decision-making, and discover what fathers feel about the division of labour, how their share of it was established and how it is maintained. Men (with children) should not automatically be regarded as workers first and fathers second; the entire spectrum of variety of men's experiences and ideas about childcare, should be taken into account.

References

Coverman, S. (1985), Explaining husbands' participation in domestic labour. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 26, 1, pp. 81-97.

Duindam, V. (1991), *Ouderschapsarrangement en geslachtsidentiteit. Geslachtsspecifieke socialisatie, geen onverdeeld succes bij een verdeeld subject?* Utrecht, Lemma.

Fisher, B. and J. Tronto (1990), Towards a Feminist Theory of Caring. In: Abel, K. and M.K. Nelson, *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives.* Abany, State University of New York.

Graham, H. (1983), Caring: a Labour of Love. In: Finch, J. and D. Groves (eds.), *A Labour of Love. Women, Work and Caring*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hochschild, A. (1989), *The second shift. Working parents and the revolution at home.* New York: Viking Press.

Kamo, Y. (1988), Determinants of Household Division of Labor. Resources, Power and Ideology. *Journal of Family Issues*, 9, 2, pp. 177-200.

Knijn, T., A. van Nunen en A. van der Avort (1994), Zorgend vaderschap. *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 3, pp. 70-97.

Lippe, T. van der (1993), *Arbeidsverdeling tussenmannen en vrouwen. een interdisciplinaire studie naar betaald en huishoudelijk werk binnen huishoudens.* Amsterdam, Thesis Publishers.

McKee, L. (1987), Fathers' Participation in Infant Care: A Critique. In: Lamb, M., *The father figure.* Erlbaum.

Ross, C.E. (1987), The division of labor at home. *Social Forces*, 65, 3.

Russell, G. (1983), *The Changing Role of Fathers.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Segal L. (1990), *Slow Motion. Changing masculinites, changing men.* London: Virago.

Tronto, B. (1989), Women and Caring: What can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring. In: Jaggar A.M. and S.R. Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge.* New Brunswick/London: Rutgers Universiy Press.

Tronto, B. (1993), *Moral boundaries.*

Ungerson, C. (1983), Why do women care? In: Finch, J. and D. Groves (eds.), *A Labour of Love. Women, Work and Caring.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Ungerson, C. (1987), *Policy is Personal. Sex, Gender and Informal Care.* London: Tavistock Publications.

Waerness, K. (1987), On the rationalisty of caring. In: Showstack Sasson, A. (ed.). *Women and The State*. London: Hutchinson.

Waerness, K. (1990), Gender and the Rationality of Caring. In: Sevenhuijsen (eds.), *Feminisme, Citizenship and Care. Congress paper Double Trouble*. University of Utrecht: Anna Maria van Schuurman Centrum.

Work and Organization Research Centre
Warandelaan 2, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands